

National Conservation Advisory Council

May 6, 1980

DIALOGUE ON THE ISSUE OF A NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CONSERVATION

Historical Perspective

The National Conservation Advisory Council has been unjustly credited by some members of the conservation profession in the United States with developing the concept of a national institute for conservation of cultural property and forcing the creation of such an agency on the conservation profession. In fact, the idea for such a national institute was first born in 1955, eighteen years before the founding of NCAC in 1973. As is noted in the historical outline that follows, the creation of a national institute for conservation was the brainchild of farsighted Americans, active in the conservation profession, some of whom are now deceased.

1955 - Fellows of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, in Washington, D. C., to attend the fiftieth anniversary meeting of the American Association of Museums, held an informal meeting at the Freer Gallery to discuss a central conservation laboratory to benefit all museums in the United States. Included in this group were Louise Bellinger, Richard Buck, F. Du Pont Cornelius, Edmond de Beaumont, Rutherford Gettens, Alfred Jakstas, Elizabeth Jones, Elisabeth Packard, Murray Pease, Russell Quandt, James Roth, George Stout, and William Todd. It was agreed that such a laboratory would be beneficial and a planning committee was appointed by this group consisting of Rutherford Gettens, Murray Pease, and George Stout (chairman). The IIC Newsletter (Fall, 1955) carried a brief notice of this meeting.

1956 - "A Proposal Relating to a National Laboratory for Conservation of Cultural Resources in the United States," a five-page document, was drafted by this committee. It included a statement that, "Collaboration among all establishments concerned in the conservation of cultural resources could be maintained most effectively through a national laboratory constituted to act as a center for investigation and service in problems of such conservation and attached to a suitable agency of the national government." This proposal was placed on the agenda of the Association of Art Museum Directors for discussion at their meeting of May, 1956 and was approved by that organization.

AN ADVISORY BODY ORGANIZED TO CONSIDER NATIONAL NEEDS IN THE
CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC AND ARTISTIC WORKS IN THE UNITED STATES

1957 - No further movement for implementation occurred. In a letter of May, 1957, George Stout lamented "The whole business of a national laboratory seems to settle into the need for a promoter. I wonder who will have time to do that."

1958 - A group of conservators and scientists participating in a conference at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum sent a letter to Dr. Edward P. Alexander, President, American Association of Museums, urging that organization to request the Smithsonian Institution to provide space for a national conservation agency. Signers of that letter included Richard Buck, Rutherford Gettens, Charles Montgomery, Murray Pease, Edward Sayre, George Stout, and William Young.

1969 - The Belmont Report was published by AAM. In this report was the statement: "It is clear that any attack on the conservation problems of museums must be long term and gradual. . . . If it is ever to be solved, the support of the Federal Government will be indispensable."

In response, Kate Lefferts, Chairman of IIC-AG, appointed a committee of American Fellows to write a position report on the needs of American museums in conservation as seen from the point of view of professional conservators. This committee consisted of Richard Buck, Robert Feller (chairman), and Rutherford Gettens.

1970 - An initial draft of a report, "Twelve Recommendations in Respect to the Needs of American Museums in Conservation," was submitted to the chairman of IIC-AG.

1973 - This report was revised and retitled, "Twelve Recommendations Concerning National Needs for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works."

The IIC-AG began to reorganize as the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. The National Conservation Advisory Council was formed in the fall of this year.

1974 - Rutherford Gettens sent a memorandum to Edward Gilbert, President, NCAC, that contained a copy of the 1956 proposal relating to a national laboratory for conservation of cultural resources in the United States. Dr. Gettens maintained that the need for such an agency still existed.

1975 - The revised report, "Twelve Recommendations Concerning National Needs for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works," was submitted to the membership of AIC at their annual business meeting. It was adopted as a committee report and published in the Bulletin, AIC 15, No. 1 (1975), 122-125.

Based on Rutherford Gettens' memorandum and an AIC paper reported by Clements Robertson, "AIC Position Paper on a National Institute for Conservation," Bulletin AIC, 15, No. 2 (1975), 3, members of NCAC discussed the concept of such a national institute.

1976 - The general concept of a national institute for conservation was formally endorsed by NCAC. A statement about such an agency was published in its report, Conservation of Cultural Property in the United States (Washington, D.C.: NCAC, 1976), pp. 24-27.

1977 - A study committee was appointed by NCAC to prepare a discussion paper or report on the concept, purposes and functions of a national institute for conservation of cultural property. Sheldon Keck chaired an AIC committee on a NIC which prepared and circulated a questionnaire to a random sample of Fellows of AIC. The responses favored a national institute with certain limitations.

1978 - The study committee, Sheldon Keck (chairman), Roy Perkinson, Peter Powers, Susanne Sack, and Edward V. Sayre, all but one of whom are Fellows of AIC, prepared a report adopted and published by NCAC as a Discussion Paper on a National Institute for Conservation of Cultural Property. This report reflected the responses from survey of AIC Fellows. Copies were sent to all AIC members in August of that year.

1979 - A follow-up request for comments on the discussion paper was sent to members of AIC. Less than 50 members of AIC shared their views on this issue with NCAC; these views were largely supportive of the concept.

Time limitations prevented a comprehensive discussion of this issue at the 1979 annual meeting of AIC.

In adopting a five-year program for action, members of NCAC, including two formal representatives of AIC and a majority among remaining representatives who are also FELLOWS of AIC, made the implementation of a national institute the top priority for its Executive Committee.

1980 - NCAC will conduct a discussion session on the issue of a national institute for conservation at the annual meeting of AIC. Marigene H. Butler, NCAC's President, will chair the session. What follows is offered to members of AIC in advance of the meeting in lieu of a lengthy, formal presentation. This will permit a maximum time for questions, comments and discussion.

Current Discussion

As a major part of its founding purpose, NCAC is attempting to clarify this subject: first, by endorsing a concept to create such an institute and second, by proposing possible functions for such an institute. NCAC has presented its efforts in a variety of ways: through its earliest report, Conservation of Cultural Property in the United States (1976); through the 1978 Discussion Paper; and through its study committee reports which relate their specific topics to a NIC. The Discussion Paper is useful for prompting new insights into potential problems and strengths of a NIC. A brief summary of the functions proposed in it is attached for review.

NCAC continues to support the basic concepts underlying the NIC proposal. A nationally coordinated effort is needed to provide sustained support for existing and future efforts in conservation practice, training and science. As a part of a NIC, a permanent conservation advisory body is needed, the majority of whose members are concerned with conservation, supplemented by officials from cultural institutions. Further, a nationally recognized permanent organization, primarily supported by public funds, should carry forward a variety of administrative and programmatic functions. For example, a NIC reasonably could take up and expand some of the activities NCAC is doing now on a limited basis. Of particular importance would be clearinghouse functions such as: increasing the ability to respond to requests from national, state and local legislative and governmental bodies; participating regularly and systematically at meetings of a wide range of organizations with concern for or influence in establishing national conservation planning; consulting with individuals and organizations seeking advice about matters related to national conservation issues; and dissemination of information and reports.

The NCAC's continued development of the NIC issue requires two stages of consideration by the conservation profession and by those organizations and institutions that potentially will benefit from it. The first consideration is support and promotion of the general concept that a NIC, appropriately constituted, funded, and supervised will greatly enhance the role of conservation in the United States. If this concept is supported, the second consideration would be to define and endorse the functions, organization, and administrative structure and limitations and restrictions of a NIC.

Consideration of the general concept continues to have positive support. There is little opposition to the idea that a national institute for conservation is needed to serve and help provide coordination for the institutions, organizations and individuals responsible for cultural property. It is time to express this support clearly.

Consideration of the formula for a NIC has prompted some reservations among members of the conservation profession. NCAC shares these concerns and recognizes the need to approach a complex plan for a NIC with deliberation. Expressions of concern about the national institute most frequently include the following.

(1) Concern about control of programs and of financial resources. Many believe complete government control would suppress private initiative and create an unnecessary bureaucracy, or that large institutions might use it to the disadvantage of small institutions and individuals, or that some conservation specialities would prosper over others.

(2) Concern about diverting resources intended for actual conservation practice, training and research to administration of the institute.

The questions which follow are directed to some of the topics where NCAC needs to achieve consensus of opinion. Following each question is a summary of opinions that have been offered most frequently. Your reaction to these questions and to the responses received by NCAC is vital to development of a second-stage proposal for a NIC.

Questions and Opinions Frequently Offered:

1. Is there an unfilled need for national coordination?
Although AIC, NCAC and other conservation-related organizations have made progress in developing a national voice for conservation, these efforts should be continued and expanded. A permanent mechanism is needed for providing sustained support and facilitating and coordinating efforts of organizations and agencies interested in conservation. A NIC could aid greatly in bringing an understanding of the philosophy and the views of conservation to federal and private foundations, to government agencies legislating policies affecting conservation, and to legislators and public officials. With the gradual expansion of the numbers and kinds of services provided by conservators and conservation agencies, active coordination and the ability to communicate with government agencies are imperative. The policies and regulations of, the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, for example, affect the routine, daily practice of conservation. A national institute alert to these actual and potential problems can effectively represent the field of conservation of cultural property before these federal agencies.

2. How can such an activity maintain appropriate independence? Are there alternatives to government sponsorship and financing?
A NIC's administrative independence from existing governmental or private institutions is basic to its ability to serve and advance conservation. The NIC must look to both government and private sources for sponsorship and financing if it is to

be systematically supported; this does not require that the NIC become a division of some existing agency. It should be established as an administratively independent entity, perhaps under some existing or new legislation. Effective coordination for conservation among existing programs will require this independence.

3. How can a NIC respond most appropriately and effectively to training programs, professional societies, cooperative and institutional conservation facilities, conservators in private practice, university research labs, and funding agencies in the public and private sectors? The first recommendation in NCAC's 1976 publication, Conservation of Cultural Property in the United States, is creation of a permanent advisory council, thus NCAC's 1978 Discussion Paper suggests creation of a governing board, one function of which is to serve as a permanent advisory council. NCAC or a successor organization, with representatives from all interested groups, could function as a permanent advisory council and continue to provide an effective forum. Such an organization will have substantial influence in shaping NIC policy. This will help to assure that a NIC responds to national conservation needs and problems effectively and honestly. In addition, it is expected that conservation programs, organizations, and individuals will maintain an independent, regular communication with a NIC as it initiates and carries out programs and services. Its success will depend largely on the amount of voluntary interaction between it and these other programs. A NIC should be required to circulate its program plans and annual reports to appropriate organizations.

4. How can conservators and other knowledgeable persons be central to the control of these activities? How can the full spread of conservation concerns be included? The first and most vital requirement should be that the majority of a NIC Board should consist of persons with direct involvement in conservation in some system of rotation. Perhaps organizations such as AIC and APT should provide lists of candidates elected from within their respective organizations. The Board should include both practicing conservators and conservation scientists and, where possible, representatives of the various conservation disciplines - museum, library and archives, architectural, etc.

5. NCAC has suggested three principal functions for NIC: a) information services; b) encouragement of education and training; and c) encouragement of scientific support and research. Are these the correct or most appropriate functions for NIC? What are the priorities among them? These are the appropriate functions for a NIC, but it should be emphasized that the negative comments in the Discussion Paper are equally as important as the positive ones; for example, basic training of conservators is not viewed as an appropriate function.

All three areas of need are important. In order to achieve the maximum amount of coordination, the three areas probably should be implemented at the same time. However, if it is not feasible to begin with a full-scale operation, each area could be started independently over a period of time. For example, informational and/or educational functions could be started on a modest scale, with minimal start-up funds and staff, and expanded gradually. Implementation of scientific support will require a far greater initial investment for staff and equipment and might come later.

6. It is agreed that issues of a professional nature, such as accreditation and certification, should not be the responsibility of a NIC. Beyond these, are there similar issues that should not be part of the mandate of a NIC? A NIC must not infringe or determine professional issues and this limitation should be indicated specifically in its mandate. In addition, it is imperative that a NIC's mandate make clear that its purpose is to support and serve the profession of conservation, not to dictate to it. In the development of new testing and treatment methods or in the generation and distribution of information, a NIC must not attempt either directly or indirectly to influence or legislate the use of a treatment or policy by conservators. This is particularly important with regard to how federal and private foundations and agencies might interpret and therefore favor such a NIC developed procedure over an alternative preferred by the individual conservator.

7. Are there any functions suggested in the Discussion Paper which might now be deferred or eliminated completely: Yes, the offering of grant support as a NIC function. Including this capability in the founding purpose of a NIC raises troublesome issues such as conflict of interest, duplication of support provided by existing funding agencies, and investment of limited resources in the complexities of grant-making. It is doubtful that a proposal to create a NIC would be able to obtain the necessary endorsement from existing support-programs for conservation if a direct conflict of interest is included in the proposal. Money is the real issue, and there are better ways to deal with it than direct grant-making. A NIC might be able to encourage greater commitment to conservation from existing sources and accomplish its basic purposes through other funding mechanisms. For example, the NIC could contract directly for needed research and could sponsor educational seminars. The capability to make grants might complicate and increase the cost of a NIC's administration without generating an equivalent amount of benefit for conservation.

8. Should access to the NIC be limited to institutions with not-for-profit status? Absolutely not. The NIC is intended to enhance and support the role of conservation in the United States. Therefore, its services and programs should

be available on a non-discriminatory basis and for an equal fee to all conservation efforts whether they be profit-making or not-for-profit. The only acceptable exception to such a policy should be in a case where a limitation on equal access is required for conformance to the law or a government regulation.

9. What are minimum levels of financing and staffing necessary to launch such an effort? No matter what scale of operation is envisioned for a NIC, organizations such as AIC, APT and NCAC should be asked to develop priorities for NIC action, and should consider and comment on any plans that are proposed for it. In any case, the effort should proceed gradually in order to assure that the NIC grows in response to the needs of the professions it serves. Only minimal staffing and financing to begin planning and organization within the NIC will be needed for the first year. Each of the three major service areas for a NIC will need to prepare and propose a basic three-year plan for review and comment by appropriate professional and service organizations and for approval by the NIC Advisory Board. The levels of financing and staffing necessary to launch a NIC will relate directly to the number of functions it initiates at the time of creation. Either the education or the information function would be least costly to start; scientific support and research would cost more; a full-scale operation would require the greatest initial investment. It is clear that funding must be sufficient to meet national needs in conservation identified by the institute.

ATTACHMENT: A brief summary of the functions proposed for a NIC.

DISCUSSION PAPER ON A NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL PROPERTY.

This document was prepared for release in a different format from other NCAC publications, in order to indicate clearly that its purpose was exactly that expressed in its title, a discussion paper. The information and commentary contained in the document reflect two years of indepth discussion by a special NCAC study committee assigned the task of suggesting appropriate functions for a national institute. The committee's recommendations were reviewed, revised and approved by the Council in late 1977.

The Discussion Paper identified three major functions that the national institute might undertake: (1) information services; (2) education services; and (3) scientific support services. The paper suggests that these functions begin on a modest scale and that its (NIC's) growth be planned and phased to increase nationally as its capabilities and the demands for its services become evident in the future.

The three broad functions cited below are considered of equal priority. Itemized within each are specific activities that the national institute might perform. They are listed here according to the approximate ease of implementation by a newly formed organization, and not necessarily in the order in the text.

A. Information Services

1. Assemble and make accessible a library of conservation literature.
2. Respond to requests for information concerning conservation problems from conservation specialists and custodians of cultural property.
3. Arrange for on-site consultations at request of institutions and organizations responsible for the conservation of cultural property.
4. Disseminate through publication or support of publication the results of research, development, and testing conducted by the national institute and elsewhere.
5. Publish standards for testing conservation materials.
6. Collect, store, and dispense conservation data and examination and treatment records that have been catalogued and arranged for immediate access nation-wide, possibly through computerization.

B. Education Services

1. Support fellowships, scholarships, and grants for training students in the fields of conservation.
2. Sponsor conservation seminars or workshops for users of conservation services: namely, those individuals who have direct or indirect responsibilities for care, protection, and handling of cultural property, such as administrators, trustees, custodians, curators, display specialists, museum preparators, interior designers, architects, registrars, archivists, and librarians.
3. Promote or sponsor continuing education for professionals in conservation, through refresher courses on conservation procedures, programs on the use of new methods and materials, conferences, and symposia or seminars on specific subjects relating to problems in conservation.
4. Promote effective ways to communicate to the public and users of conservation services information on the aims, values, needs, limitations, and accomplishments of conservation through support of lectures, publications, films, television programs, and exhibitions to create general awareness and understanding.

C. Scientific Support Services

The research and development activities, including analysis and testing, listed below would presumably be carried out in part at the national institute and in part through the institute's support at other centers of research in conservation.

1. Coordinate establishment of standards for testing in conservation; i.e., standards for testing the composition of materials employed in conservation treatment as well as for testing the environment, packaging, and transportation of cultural property.
2. Develop simple and improved analytical tests for use by conservation professionals in identifying components of cultural materials.
3. Test and evaluate procedures and materials used previously or presently in conservation.
4. Test and evaluate materials developed for other purposes, but potentially applicable in conservation.
5. Provide analytical services where suitable facilities are not available.
6. Investigate the chemical, physical, and biological mechanisms in deterioration and decay of cultural property. Determine and characterize component materials in artifacts and study the chemical/physical interaction of the materials within the artifact as it ages.
7. Develop new procedures and materials for use in conservation.
8. Supervise the manufacture of materials especially for conservation where necessary so that conservators can use standard materials of known composition instead of commercial products of proprietary and variable composition.

In the attempt to specify more precisely the potential functions of a National Institute for Conservation of Cultural Property, the question of how such an institute would be related to existing public and private structures was considered. It became apparent, however, that any recommendation of a formal structure at this stage would be premature. The study committee elected, therefore, to propose certain broad functions and objectives of the institute. Later, following discussion of these matters among a wider group of concerned colleagues, various alternative administrative and organizational relationships can be considered, in order to determine the most effective structure to propose.

For the more complete analysis of proposed functions and some recommendations for a national institute for conservation, the reader is urged to consult directly the Discussion Paper on a National Institute for Conservation of Cultural Property in the United States. Both of these documents and all other

NCAC publications have been provided to AIC members. However, if a review copy of any NCAC publication is needed, it may be obtained on a limited basis from the NCAC's Administrative Office.